

Big Hole



Watershed Committee

Big Hole Watershed Committee Monthly Meeting Minutes September 19, 2012 ~ 7:00 - 9:00pm Divide Grange Hall

In Attendance

Jen Titus, BHWC; Phil Ralston, Rancher; Liz Jones, Rancher; Bill Cain, Secretary; Jim Olsen, MT FWP; Steve Luebeck, Sportsman/Treasurer; Erik Kalsta, Rancher; George Trischman, Rancher; Cindy Ashcraft, Rancher; Dave Ashcraft, Rancher; Doug Clark, ADLC; Joe Willauer, Guide; Jim Hagenbarth, Rancher/Co-Chair; Rick Hartz, BVD County; Garth Haugland, BVD County; Scott Reynolds, GGTU; Steve Parker, BHRF; Paul Siddoway, Conservationist; Mark Kambich, Rancher; Hans Humbert, Rancher; Doug Finnicum, BSB County

Introduction

Attendees introduced themselves. August meeting minutes approved.

Presentation: Big Hole River Fisheries - Jim Olsen, MT FWP

Power Point Presentation

It is a dry year, but river flows could have been worse. Thank you water users for your help.

1. Big Hole River Fish Populations

Jim has been looking through historical fish data for the Big Hole. 1981 was the first year the Big Hole had a slot limit and that limit was expanded in 1988. The change can be seen in the fish data.

- Big Hole River near Jerry Creek: Slot limit had no effect on rainbow mass. Rainbow numbers low in high water years because they are spring spawners and high water increases mortality in the redds. Brown trout responded well to the slot limit. Prior the slot limit there were few browns. Today the brown:rainbow ratio is roughly 50:50.
- Big Hole River near Melrose: Both the number and pounds of fish per mile increased with the slot limit initially, then numbers flattened as the section reached carrying capacity. Before the slot limit there were many fish greater than 25 inches. Now there are few fish greater than 25 inches as fish have become smaller and not as fat.
- Big Hole River near Hogback (Glen to Notchbottom): This section shows the most impact from drought. The population in this section is down 1/3 from the previous section; however, fish in this section tend to be larger, likely due to less competition. Rainbows numbers have doubled in the last few years while brown populations remains flat. Jefferson River rainbows may be migrating into the Big Hole to spawn and causing the increase in number.
- Big Hole River near Pennington Bridge: 700 fish per mile and 1/2 of the population in the Melrose section. Limiting factors are water quantity, water temperature, and lack of habitat. There are no tributaries below the notch, except Birch Creek (which does not reach the river). The river in this section is stabilized with riprap, preventing the river from moving to create new habitat. As a result,

BHWC recently completed a Lower Corridor Report to review alternatives for fish habitat in this section. BHWC has also proposed this section as a Drought Management Plan section, for review in 2013.

Question: In Melrose, why are there fewer rainbows than browns? *Ans:* Whirling disease. Melrose has a high rate of Whirling disease in rainbows, while above and below this section there is little effect. This may be due to local geology creating conditions that are ideal for worm survival. Young fish less than 4 inches and prior to their bones becoming solidified are most affected.

2. Wise River:

As part of BHWC efforts in the Wise River, FWP conducted fish assessments beginning in 2011. Prior to this there was little baseline information for Wise River.

- Wise River near Mono Creek: Sampled in 2011, this section yielded a high number of brook trout, followed by Burbot, then rainbow, then whitefish. No grayling. Fish numbers were lower than expected. Brook trout were 200 fish per mile (a similar stream might yield 200 fish per 200 yards). Reasoning is not clear. Whitefish are sensitive, suggesting it is not a water quality issue and there appears to be excellent habitat.

- Wise River near Wyman Creek: Sampled in 2011, this section was also brook trout dominant (450 brook/1.8 miles). Habitat was in good condition and again fish numbers were lower than expected. 9 brown trout were collected, likely coming from the Big Hole to spawn. Second most dominant were whitefish, also likely from the Big Hole to spawn (whitefish were present in high numbers on the mark, but nearly gone for the recapture).

- Lower Wise River (below Pattengail): Low habitat diversity due to Pattengail flood that left the river channelized. Planning to do habitat classification this fall.

Since fish numbers are low in Wise River despite available habitat, Wise River may be an excellent opportunity to relocate grayling.

Comment: Include catch and release fishing as part of drought management plan, especially in lower river, to limit fish take. This was proposed by Oswald in years past, but not adopted. [*Jen noted this for 2013 DMP review consideration*].

3. Westslope Cutthroat Trout Projects

Building secure cutthroat populations = no non-native fish and fish population greater than 2500 fish. Long-term goal is to reoccupy 20% of historical habitat which equates to 350 miles of stream in the Big Hole. Focus is tributary streams. Catch and release restriction is removed once fish populations are considered secure.

- Cherry Creek Update: 2011 was non-native fish removal from Cherry Creek and two lakes with a barrier installed. Once secure, this population will be able to provide eggs for future projects. In 2012, 250 triploid (sterile) fish were stocked in each lake (500 fish total) for fishing. The stream was restocked with 3500 eggs from three locations in the Big Hole. The eggs were taken to a hatchery until "eyed",

then planted in Cherry Creek in incubators. This will occur for three years, after which time the populations should reproduce on its own.

- McVey Creek Update: Fish barrier installed at highway crossing. cutthroat trout were present in this stream. 300 fish were removed and stored, non-native fish were removed, and cutthroat returned to the stream. The barrier needs some modification.

- Other Projects: Cutthroat trout restoration projects are also underway in Doolittle Creek, Sixmile Creek, Twelve Mile Creek and Deep Creek.

- Summary: When Jim arrived in this position there were 11 miles of cutthroat trout habitat. Today there are 40 miles.

Reports & New Business

Directors Report:

Several people provided volunteer support this month, including Mark Kambich (meeting room set up), Rick Hartz (fundraising & Wise River support), Joe Willauer (BHWC support from outfitter shops), WWB volunteers (many!). [omitted: Scott Reynolds, presenter scheduled - sorry Scott, forgot you!]

Drought: No stream flow report tonight. Conditions remain dry and warm. However, flows remain just above the last trigger and night temperatures keep the river cool. No river closure warranted.

Projects: Lower River Corridor Project approved and final. Wise River survey complete; Overall projects are getting completed, but we are behind on many deadlines. Presented at MWCC in August and will present at AWRA poster session October 10 at Fairmont Hot Spring Resort for the Wise River project.

Funding: Cinnabar match grant is complete. Overall donations are 6% ahead of 2011, and we still have 3 months remaining in the year. However, it is not enough yet. Please continue to help raise funds.

BHWC Position: Strategy remains the same: 1. Finish projects and contracts and 2. Fundraise. This will continue through the fall as many deadlines approach. New strategy to start in winter.

Blackfoot Challenge Workshop next week. One position available. [Update 9/23/12: BHWC representatives will be Erik Kalsta, Jamie Murdoch, Jim Magee, Jim Berkey, Jen Titus]

Land Use Planning Report: Jen Boyer, FutureWest has scheduled roundtables October 8th (6:30pm at the Crossing, Wisdom) & 9th (6:30pm at the Hitching Post, Melrose) to discuss the Payment for Ecosystem Services program. She buys dinner! Please consider attending.

Steering Committee: Jen continues to keep Steering Committee up to date - direction is going well.

Wildlife Committee: Jim Hagenbarth will present the range rider 2013 proposal to the RAC committee 9/20/12. Jim is working to hold a meeting with FWP for the moose study - no date yet.

Weed Committee: WWB was successful. Gross income was less than average, yet costs were less than average and therefore profit remained about the same. Set up this year was great. Full report at next meeting.

New Business

- Paul Siddoway opened discussion on possible rebuilding of Pattengail Dam to benefit in stream flow. BHWC has done great work to benefit stream flow to date; however, a more significant water source is needed. This would benefit instream flows, fire (source water for dipping), recreation, etc. This needs to be a big project and supported in the political arena. Paul has spoke with many people about this project and rarely finds a negative response. Paul is preparing an editorial for the newspaper. *Conclusion:* BHWC has sought water storage before and to no avail. Before time is spent on this idea, the first step would be to have a technical report created to assess the feasibility of the project as has been done with past projects. The greatest barrier in past projects was ownership and responsibility of the project. That barrier would present itself on this project as well. BHWC does not have funds to put forth on this effort, but is willing to solicit a cost estimate.

Future Agendas

- October 17: Set up by Joe Willauer. Topic TBA
- November 28 (*Note change of week for the holiday)
- Possible topics include Highlands Gold Mine, Watershed Restoration Planning, ATKINS Mapping Update

Adjourn: The meeting was adjourned at 9:15pm